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AUTHOR Pascal, Christine
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ABSTRACT

Three central convictions provide the main thesis of this lecture: (1) that children and those working with them are undervalued; (2) that the quality of education for the young child suffers because young children and those who work with them have no status; and (3) that young children need an articulate and empowered body of professionals to act as advocates on their behalf. The discussion of the undervaluation of children touches on the nature and importance of childhood, the position of young children today, the low status of those who work with children, the impact of early educational experience on the nation's development, and current policy for young children. The variable quality of educational provisions for young children is discussed in the context of the lack of an evidential base, research on quality, and research on early childhood educators. The need for advocates is addressed in the context of the politics of early childhood education, political advocacy, the domestication of the early years practitioner, and empowerment and transformation. An agenda for empowered early childhood groups is recommended. This agenda would allow the groups to discuss the realities of their situation and more fully understand why inequalities have developed and how these are perpetuated. Contains 21 references. (SM)

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WORCESTER COLLEGE

Inaugural Professorial Lecture

Professor Christine Pascal

23rd March 1992

Advocacy, Quality and the Education of the Young Child

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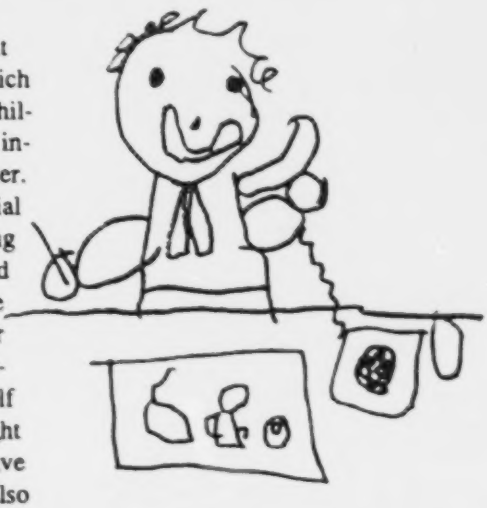
INTRODUCTION



I very much welcome the opportunity that this inaugural lecture provides me of talking about those issues which permeate my life and which surround one of my abiding passions - young children. I have spent my entire professional life involved with young children in one way or another. Firstly, at 18 as a Child Attendant in a Social Services Children's Home in Birmingham working with children who were abused, unwanted and disabled. Then as an infant teacher in two large city primary schools and latterly, as a teacher educator and researcher in Early Years at Worcester. I have loved every minute of it. I count myself as very privileged to have a career which has brought me into close contact with young children who have given me such pleasure, fulfilment and joy. I'd also want to add at this point, that this career from the outset has been underpinned and informed by my studies in the social and political sciences and in education. For me, there has not been, and never could be, any separation of theory and practice. They sit within me, neatly intertwined in a symbiotic relationship, each feeding off and nourishing the other. I have always been hungry for both.

In my lecture this evening, I think you will be able to identify quite clearly the three areas of scholarship which have fed my particular perspectives on the work I am engaged in. The three strands of politics, social policy and education will weave themselves through my discussion. I make no apologies for this even though I am aware of the current reluctance to acknowledge the contribution of the social sciences. I believe that they encapsulate the essence of what it is to be human and, in particular, what it is to be a child in today's world.

The title of my lecture too, has three elements;

Advocacy, Quality and the Education of the Young Child.

Although I believe, like the Early Years Curriculum, that these three areas cannot be compartmentalised, I am going to address them one at a time but beginning with the last first and working backwards. This seems quite appropriate, not only because the child should always be at the centre but also because everything else I have to say this evening is about a call to action on their behalf.

The main thesis of my lecture rests on three central convictions:

1. *"That we as a nation undervalue our children and, consequently, those who work with them."*

2. *"That the quality of educational provision for the young child suffers because young children and those who work with them have no status."*

3. *"That young children need an articulate and empowered body of professionals to act as advocates on their behalf."*

These three key statements form the structural framework on which my lecture will rest. I intend to take them one at a time, but to hold on to the centrality of the child throughout.

1. THE UNDERVALUATION OF OUR CHILDREN

The nature and importance of childhood.

One of the particular characteristics of our species is that we are born in a state of dependency - immature, helpless and with plenty of development yet to occur. Although we are still finding out about what actually happens in these first formative years, studies of child development and psychology have shown us that this development is a complex interaction of environmental and biological influences. As we progress through the 1990's we have a growing wealth of medical, as well as social and educational evidence, which has established the critical importance of childhood in shaping and determining the adult and, therefore, the future of society as a whole. I'd certainly agree with John Tomlinson (1990) that a civilised society must believe that the young and vulnerable need nurture and protection and that this is a social as well as a private concern.

However, as this knowledge and conviction in the importance of childhood has accumulated, what has also emerged is a growing fear that childhood, far from being nurtured and cherished, is actually being destroyed. This fear has found expression in the publication of books with titles such as, "The Rise and Fall of Childhood" (Sommerville 1982), "The Erosion of Childhood" (Suranky 1982) and "The Disappearance of Childhood" (Postman 1983). These authors argue that in a materialistic, utilitarian world the natural and very necessary stages of a young child's development are being obliterated. However, even in this climate of anxiety we can still find some political rhetoric about the importance of children. Here is one glorious example, and I quote,

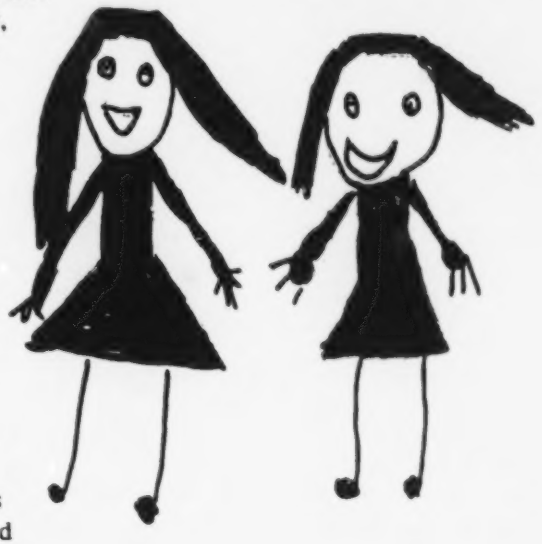
> *"...children must come first because children are our most sacred trust. They also hold the key to our future in a very practical sense. It will be their ideas and their resourcefulness which will help solve such problems as disease, famine and the threats to the environment and it is their ideas and their values which will shape the future character and culture of our nation."*

This quote was taken from a speech by Margaret Thatcher to the George Thomas Society Inaugural Lecture on 17th January 1990. I'm sure we would all agree wholeheartedly with the sentiments expressed here but reflect sadly that in reality, the rhetoric has not been matched with any action.

Position of young children today.

Let us now have a look at the reality of how young children have fared in the UK since 1979. I have taken my evidence from a UNICEF sponsored study on the incidence of child poverty and deprivation in eight major industrialised countries. UNICEF has been gathering evidence for a number of years on the status of children in third world

countries but during the 80's became anxious that conditions for children in industrialised countries were deteriorating. The UK data was put together and analysed by Jonathan Bradshaw of the University of York (Bradshaw 1990) and it makes chilling reading. I have also drawn on the work of Chelly Halsey (Halsey 1988), who had a formative influence on me when I worked briefly with him in Oxford in the 1970's. Both of these researchers found it enormously difficult to discover how children in the UK have fared over the years and in comparison with other countries, mainly because the necessary databases do not exist. They found, as I have in my work, that the statistics which are collected are limited to those the Government chooses to collect and by the manner in which they choose to publish them.



However, despite the difficulties outlined, what emerges clearly and unequivocally, from an analysis of the evidence that does exist, is that up to 1979 the proportion of children in poverty in the UK was falling, inequalities were being reduced and that there had been a general improvement in living standards, health and welfare (Halsey 1988). Yet during the 80's these trends have been reversed and the startling fact emerges that in the last ten years the incidence of child poverty in the UK has more than doubled, from a figure of 7.5% in 1979 to a figure of 15.6% in 1989 (Bradshaw 1990). That amounts to an awful lot of children. In the so-called "social market", there has been no "trickle-down" effect from greater social wealth; the poor (and due to a number of social factors many of the poor are children), are much poorer.

In the face of this evidence it is clear that we, as a nation, can make no claim to have valued or cherished our children. This not only worries me greatly on a number of levels, it also angers me. I sometimes look back on the pioneering work done by people like Margaret McMillan and her fight to end poverty and degradation for young children in the 1890's and wonder just how far we have come. For me, her campaigns seem to remain as relevant today as ever (Steedman 1990). Young children continue to have no status and no voice in the system and those of us who work with them seem to continue to mirror this in our position in the social order.

The low status of those who work with young children.

Working with young children in the 1990's is still largely viewed by wider society as a low status, unintellectual activity which lacks both rigour and academic credibility. Early childhood educators are viewed generally as "nice ladies", (and most are ladies), who do not like to offend and are anxious to please people. The roots of this are historical and also, probably, endemic in the very essence of the job we do. We ARE mostly caring, considerate, warm people - it's hard to imagine people choosing to work with children who do not possess these characteristics. Perhaps this helps to explain why we have not been good at fighting for our profession,

at saying no, at asserting ourselves and at dealing with conflict. There are also clearly gender issues deeply embedded in all of this. Certainly, the effect of these qualities, (and they are, semantically and culturally, feminine qualities), has figured largely in my own personal fight to be acknowledged as an articulate, intelligent professional with academic credibility and an acknowledged field of scholarship. These are important issues, which I shall return to with some force later. At this juncture, I simply want to point out that young children have not had a group of high status and powerful professionals to make a case for them in the corridors of power. It is towards this issue that my attention is increasingly turning.

The impact of early educational experience.

Perhaps we should just pause at this point and ask the question, "Does it really matter?". Does it matter that many of our children are growing up without the best quality experiences a developed nation like ours can afford? What difference will it make in the long term? Are these just moral and humanitarian issues or are there hardnosed economic and social factors which should also come into the equation? Again, let's look at some of the evidence.

The best research we have about the effects of high quality early childhood education has come out of America. They seem to have both the funds and commitment to sustain these long term projects. The most well known is a study based at the HighScope Project Centre in Ypsilanti, Michigan. David Weikart and his colleagues have followed large cohorts of poor, inner city children through from the age of 3 and traced their development to adulthood (Schweinhart, Weikart and Larner 1986). What emerges from this study, (and it has been confirmed in a UK study led by Albert Osborn at Bristol (Osborn and Milbank 1987)), is that high quality pre-school education does have a profound and long term effect on a child's subsequent development. However, the effect is not one that might have been immediately apparent from the educational focus of the programmes.

I think it is worth looking at this in more detail as one of the most fascinating and, perhaps, persuasive findings has been that different kinds of pre-school programme will have different effects. Weikart's study included children who had all had high quality pre-school education but of three different kinds. He looked at children who had experienced a semi-structured nursery programme, children who had experienced a highly structured skills-based programme and children who had experienced a programme which was structured to provide them with choice and to foster their independence and autonomy. The children who had experienced these programmes were then followed through systematically. The results showed that at five all these children were showing significant cognitive gains but at eight these had been largely "washed out", although the effect of the highly structured programme did seem to last a little longer. By fifteen there was no discernible difference between children who had experienced any of the programmes and those who had not, in terms of their intellectual development. However, what was far more powerful and very obvious was that the children who had followed the programme which had allowed choice and fostered independence and autonomy were, in adolescence and adulthood, significantly more likely to be in employment, less likely to be drawing benefits, less likely to have had teenage pregnancy and less likely to be trouble with the police. (There's a message for Kenneth Baker here.) In other words, these children were

actually more socially conforming than those who had experienced a very tightly structured drill and skill regime. Giving these children a feeling of control over their lives at an early age had given them a feeling of self worth and self efficacy which was with them for life. For me, the case is made on social and moral grounds, but you might also be interested to know that Weikart has costed this up in great detail, (he's a businessman at heart), and shown that investment in high quality pre-school provision OF THE RIGHT KIND actually saves millions of pounds in police and social service costs. The economic argument is a powerful one in today's climate and perhaps we should get better at using it if we are to convince politicians and policy makers.

Current policy for young children.

This brings me on to the final part of this section and I briefly want to touch upon the effect of all this knowledge on policy. It won't take long because there is not a lot of it! At present there is no national policy for young children. The care and education of the young is viewed, along with other social and welfare issues, as largely the responsibility of the individual, and not as a responsibility of wider society. This is despite a number of government reports which have called for a national policy and highlighted the need for one central department to deal with children (GB House of Commons Select Committee 1986, 1989, DES 1990). It is also despite the trend which can be identified throughout the rest of Europe, where countries are moving rapidly towards coherent national policies and investment in the education of and care of the young (Pascal, Bertram and Heaslip 1991). The inadequacy and variability of provision in the UK is well documented (Pugh 1988, Cohen 1988, Moss 1988). Yet, the current policy continues to be one which rests on the belief that choice, diversity and quality will be enhanced through a reliance on market forces alone. In reality, the practical outcome of this is that for many parents and children there is diversity but no choice and very often, the quality of what is available to them leaves a lot to be desired. It is towards this issue of quality that I shall now turn but before I move on I'd like to restate my first conviction.

> *"That we, as a nation, undervalue our children and, consequently, those who work with them."*

2. THE VARIABLE QUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL PROVISION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

The lack of an evidential base.

Having established the importance of high quality provision and stated the existence of a wide variety of educational settings for the young, I would now like to map out for you the quality and range of educational experiences offered to young children in the 1990's. Unfortunately, I am not able to do so. This is not due to any reluctance, or lack of commitment on my part, but due to the fact that at present there does not exist an evidential base on which such an analysis can take place. The plain truth is that we just do not know what the quality of educational provision for the young actually is. As a member of the Rumbold Committee (DES 1990), I was astonished in our call for research evidence on quality for the under fives to find that there was very little. In particular, there was no comparative data by which quality in different settings could be assessed and compared. The information which we did find was focused primarily on facts and figures and could not tell us about the quality of the experience for the child.

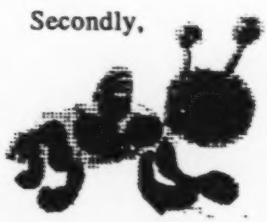
There are very few qualitative studies on educational provision for the young. This says something again of the low status which is attached to this area of inquiry. Research funding councils do not appear to see it as important enough to warrant a focus for their resources. Early childhood research proposals continue to do badly in research ratings and so the paucity of good research on quality is perpetuated. I am sure it will not surprise you that a disproportionate amount of my time at present is spent trying to overcome these funding barriers. However, as an early childhood educator I am used to working on a shoestring and through the research I have managed to do despite this, I am beginning to gather some evidence on this issue of quality.

Research on quality.

I am not going to go into great detail about my research at this point. My earlier work on four year olds in school has been published (Pascal and Ghaye 1988, Pascal 1990), and the project on educational quality that I am currently involved in is still at an early stage of development. However, I would like to pull out some key points from this work.

Firstly, that decisions about children's early and formative educational experiences are often made on economic rather than educational grounds. Also that these decisions are generally made by those who have little knowledge or understanding of the needs of the young child.

Secondly, that although I found some excellent examples of high quality educational provision for young children, I also found many three and 4 year olds being educated in contexts which were inappropriate, under resourced and poorly staffed. Also it was evident that for many children, their first experience of school was a traumatic and stressful experience.



Thirdly, I am discovering that comparing educational quality in different contexts is a complex, difficult and poorly understood process and that it cannot be reduced purely to things which are measurable and quantifiable.

This research work is but a tiny drop in an enormous and turbulent sea. There is clearly an urgent need for large scale, comparative and qualitative research on quality. Informed decisions about the education and care of children cannot be made without this. Until such research is funded properly and given due acknowledgement, policy will continue to be made on the hoof in a reactive and piecemeal fashion.

The evidence on the educators.

There are also other issues about the educators of young children which have emerged from the projects and which deserve mention at this point. All the research I have undertaken can be characterised as being collaborative and participative in nature. I believe strongly that quality assessment is a value-based enterprise and that effective evaluation is best achieved through the active involvement of all the participants in the process. It should not be something which is "done to" people, but rather something which is "done with" them. I have worked with many early childhood practitioners over the past few years and what has struck me forcibly is how many of them are only too aware of the inadequacies and deficiencies of the situations in which they find themselves a part. Yet, they are at a loss to know what to do about it.

Early childhood educators have always been reluctant to speak out, to challenge, to assert their right to proper resourcing and to demand what they know the children in their care need. But I am finding that in the current climate of competition, enterprise, consumerism and speculation they are increasingly losing confidence in their own ability to effect any change upon a system, with which many of them are deeply unhappy. It is this issue which I want to finally focus on, but first let me restate my second conviction.

> *"That the quality of educational provision for the young child suffers because young children, and those who work with them, have no status."*

3. THE NEED FOR ADVOCATES

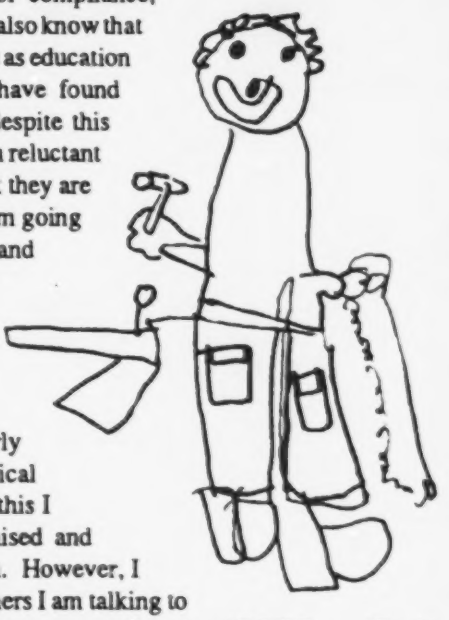
The politics of early childhood education.

The apolitical stance of many people is captured in Locke's statement that,

> *"Politics should be kept out of education. Education should be kept out of politics." (Locke 1974)*

Proponents of this view argue that education is something too important to suffer the insult of political debate. They believe it should rise above this and assume a position which is above contention and conflict and which reflects a consensus of opinion. However, I don't believe that this is either accurate or possible. Education, and probably early childhood education more than any other area, is absolutely political. It is about the distribution of power, the exertion of influence and the ability to provide people with the means to

conserve or transform society. Education is the terrain where power and politics are given the most fundamental expression. It is a process through which individuals are opened or closed to the languages of critique and possibility. Those of us involved in early childhood education know that it is through the educational experiences we offer at this early stage that an attitude to life is formed in each individual child. This attitude will allow questioning or acceptance, curiosity or compliance, passivity or action. Early childhood educators also know that somehow they have lost out in the power stakes as education has become a political football, and they have found themselves excluded from the game. Yet despite this awareness, early childhood educators are often reluctant to acknowledge the political nature of the task they are engaged in. In this final part of my lecture I am going to argue strongly that until they do, their status, and that of the children they have a responsibility for, will remain oppressed.



A call for political advocacy.

For some time now I have been arguing that early childhood educators need to become "political advocates" on behalf of young children. By this I mean that they need to be articulate, organised and skilful in acting as a voice for young children. However, I have become increasingly aaware that the teachers I am talking to find this message very hard. This was brought home to me after a local ECHO (Early Childhood Organisation) meeting, when a reception class teacher came up to me and said,

> *"I feel beleaguered and helpless. It's people like you who can make a difference. You must act on behalf of all of us."*

I went home and chewed on this for days, and as I chewed I found myself becoming uncomfortable with the growing realisation that perhaps I was becoming another excuse for inactivity and acceptance of the status quo.

I am often told I am a strong role model for early years teachers. By this, I think they mean that people can identify easily with who I am and the way I think and operate. I would agree that we all need role models. I myself have learned a lot from studying the life and work of Margaret McMillan, whose campaigning spirit has fed my own. I think such people can act as catalysts in the process of change and I am happy with such a role. But, if the activity of such campaigners removes the pressure on individuals to act for themselves I fear they are in danger of becoming dysfunctional. I believe that there is a real need for groups of strong and active individuals who, at a grassroots as well as at a national and European level, act together to bring about change. This is why organisations such as ECHO*, BAECE*, EYCG* and TACTYC* are so important. In their combined unity there is strength and I feel that it is through this kind of unity that the transformation we are talking about will occur.

As I reflect on these issues I have become increasingly drawn to the work of Paulo Freire and his analysis of the situation of the oppressed in Latin America (Freire 1970, 1985). On first impression his work might seem rather remote from the world of the infant classroom but I think it has an immediacy and a relevance which is profound. Freire's writing is complex and thought-provoking. It is the kind that sticks in your teeth and keeps niggling at you to go back and have another go at it. There is always another layer to uncover. I would like to offer some of his ideas to you in order to analyse why many early childhood educators find themselves in a state of powerlessness and inertia.

The "domestication" of the early years practitioner.

Freire argues that any oppressed group of people have, over time, become "domesticated", (somehow this term has an appropriate ring when applied to early childhood education). By this he means that they have become the passive recipients of action by others. As "domesticated" individuals, they are not invited to participate actively or creatively in the world in which they operate. The structures which perpetuate the status quo are never discussed, or more often they are obscured by alternative forms of debate and discussion.

Let's apply this to the early childhood educator. She is told that although she has the reception class she has to take on board a curriculum which has been handed down to her and which she has had no part in shaping. She is told that it is non-negotiable and that the focus of her activity must be to find ways of efficiently and effectively assessing it. This takes up so much of her time and energy there is nothing left for questioning the original direction. So, the teacher passively and obediently takes up the challenge, however unrealistic and inappropriate, and does the best she can.

We can see through this example how the system operates to maintain this "culture of silence" in which no one feels able to question or refuse to go along with it all. The situation is also perpetuated by the fact that early years educators tend to be what Freire terms, not disparagingly,"political illiterates". By this he means that they view society

***ECHO (Early Childhood Organisation) *BAECE (British Association of Early Childhood Education) *TACTYC (Tutors of Advanced Courses for Teachers of Young Children) *EYCG (Early Years Curriculum Group)**

as a fait accompli, rather than as something that is in the making and that can be shaped and modified by their action. He argues that such people,

> *"...suffer from a lack of hope...and experience a feeling of impotence before the irrationality of an alienating and almighty reality."* (Freire 1985 p103)

I think we can probably all attach to the feelings of powerlessness in this analysis!

So, how might we break this cycle and liberate the beleaguered early years teacher to become an empowered and politically literate professional with a view of themselves as an active and powerful presence in the educational world? These are big questions.

Empowerment and Transformation.

Empowerment is one of those delicious words that melts on the tongue like ice-cream, but what exactly does it mean? What relevance has it for the early childhood educator? How does a person become empowered? These are the final questions I wish to address.

The term empowerment has become fashionable in relation to liberation projects, women's groups and black activist organisations. It refers to a process which is directed towards the transformation of society, so that a group of people who lack an equitable share of valued resources gain greater control over these. For the early childhood educator this would mean them actively working towards getting a greater share of the limited resources available within the education system. It would involve them looking at, and discussing, issues of power. It would involve them making themselves aware of how resources are distributed in the system, and it would involve them taking action to ensure that they played a part in the decisions about this. I am talking about people actively taking charge of their own professional lives, rather than allowing others to make decisions for them. In this call for action I am setting an agenda for early childhood groups such as ECHO, BAECE, EYCG and TACTYC because I believe they already provide life lines for many early years practitioners which can be built upon. I also believe that our teacher education courses ought to be addressing these issues too. Let us now consider what this agenda might consist of.

The first stage in the process is what Freire terms "consciousness raising", in which the "language of possibility" should dominate. Initially, the empowered group is encouraged to discuss the realities of their situation so that they can understand more fully why inequalities have developed and how these are perpetuated. For an early childhood group such issues as gender, shifting patterns of family life and poor career prospects might figure on this part of the agenda.

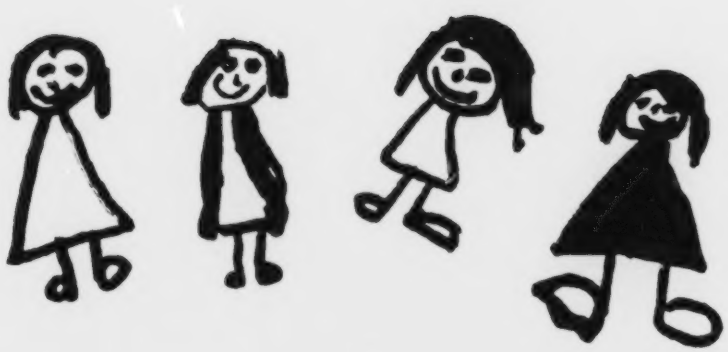
They could then go on to explore alternative realities and to evaluate strategies by which these may be realised. Here, an early childhood group might suggest that a shift in priorities should take place to ensure, for example, that an infant child received a larger share of the educational budget than a secondary child or that there was a substantial investment in pre-school education.

Finally, the empowered early childhood group could explore how the existing social order might be challenged. For example, they might consider ways of ensuring that their members were included in all senior management teams, or represented on all relevant Government working parties.

The process I am describing does not provide people with ready made answers, it encourages them to seek their own solutions. I ought to acknowledge that it will also generate tensions and conflicts. Change is never easy but the early childhood educators I have come into contact with are a pretty sturdy lot. They know, deep down, that they cannot afford to continue in their current state of inactivity and inertia. Young children's lives are too important. I am increasingly convinced that the means of transforming the way society views our youngest children ultimately resides with those who work with them. My last conviction reflects this belief.

> *"That young children need an articulate and empowered body of professionals to act as advocates on their behalf."*

I look forward to the emergence of a body of early childhood professionals who are confident, proud, and dignified with a strong sense of their own self worth and an unshakable belief in the importance of what they do. Our children deserve no less.



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